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## Can Business Development Skills Be Taught?

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Among the biggest trends in law firm marketing today is business development training and coaching. If lawyers are requested or required to develop business in order to advance their careers, firms have concluded that it makes sense to provide some instruction on how to do it.

It's fair to say that most lawyers lack backgrounds or education in marketing. Even fewer have any experience in sales. In years gone by, young lawyers would learn these skills at the feet of the firm's partners. Partners would informally or formally mentor their associates not just in substantive legal areas but in marketing, too, by taking them to client meetings, networking events and pitches for new business. And in a few firms, this remains true today.

However, as firms have grown, time pressures have increased, and client willingness to pay for extracurricular activities has diminished (or completely vanished), and fewer lawyers are receiving this invaluable field training. As a result, it behooves a firm to structure programs to provide the lawyers with information on the firm's expectations and strategies for success in business development.

The Great Debate

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A savvy rainmaker once said to me when we were discussing marketing training: “You can't teach a 300-pound man to be a jockey.” Can you teach lawyers to be rainmakers? The answer is clearly open to debate.

Some people believe that, with proper personal motivation, any lawyer can learn to develop business. Others, like my client, believe that some lawyers are natural rainmakers and others are best left to cultivate and service clients.

I fall somewhere in the middle. There is no question that there are natural rainmakers. These lawyers would bring in business whether the firm encouraged it or not. Other lawyers have no tendency or interest. In one US firm, for example, the lawyers were offered \$1,500 cash for turning in (not even executing) an individual marketing plan; several lawyers refused to participate.

Between the naturals and the recalcitrants lie the great majority—perhaps 60 to 80 per cent of the lawyers in any given firm—who I believe benefit from business development training or coaching. They have the motivation, whether personal or financial, but lack the skills. They are engaging in marketing activities, but don't know if they're doing the right things. They have contacts but don't know how to turn them into business. Or they have a client base but could “take it to the next level” with proper management of their practices. These are the lawyers for whom coaching and training programs should be geared.

The lawyers generally benefit in three ways from a business development training program. Ideas. Some lawyers need help identifying appropriate strategies that will effectively develop their practices, from specific target contacts to activities that will produce the best return on investment. Perspective. Many lawyers find it valuable to learn if they're on the right track, for example, or how long it might be before they see results. Discipline. A large majority of lawyers can benefit from the discipline and accountability a structured program can provide, from deadlines to “check in” contacts.

#### Institutional Coaching and Training Strategies

Business development training or coaching programs take many forms in law firms, depending on the firm's culture, the number of lawyers, the budget, the availability of in-house resources and other factors. Some firms employ several of these strategies to provide a comprehensive and integrated training program. The following are examples.

**Group training.** Like CLE programs, law firms organize marketing-related workshops, or in some cases entire curricula, for groups of lawyers. Depending on the firm, these could be offered to all lawyers or selected categories of lawyers (e.g., fourth- and fifth-year associates, first-year partners, etc.). In some firms, the training programs will incorporate a hands-on component, like attending a social event to practice networking skills or developing and presenting a pitch for a targeted new business to colleagues.

**One-on-one coaching.** Some firms are offering business development “coaches” to selected lawyers. Like personal trainers, coaches help each lawyer identify the proper plan of action and follow up to ensure implementation. Firms often limit access to coaches to those lawyers who have demonstrated interest and some acumen related to business development.

**Marketing mentors.** A limited number of firms have developed marketing mentor programs. Partners are assigned less experienced lawyers to introduce to marketing and business development situations. Mentor programs often work in conjunction with developmental checklists that indicate what experiences lawyers should have by certain years, like participating in a client development meeting, drafting a proposal, participating in a firm seminar, authoring an article, etc.

**Individual marketing plans.** Many firms ask their lawyers to develop individual plans; in some cases, these are marketing/business development plans and in others they are more

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comprehensive business plans. The purpose of the plan is for lawyers to identify their goals for their practices (e.g., develop a niche in the biofuel industry), quantify some objectives (e.g., obtain \$250,000 in new business over two years), and outline the actions that will be taken to accomplish the plan (e.g., specific contacts, membership in associations, credibility-enhancing activities, etc.).

Peer groups. Finally, some firms have found success creating a forum for lawyers to talk to their colleagues about

business development issues and ideas. For example, a small number of similarly situated lawyers in a firm might meet over lunch once a month to discuss their successes, failures and questions related to business development.

## Conclusion

Whether you can turn all your lawyers into business developers is still open for debate. However, if you expect them to participate in marketing or business development activities, it is only fair to help the lawyers understand the importance of business development to their careers, and to provide some resources to help them achieve success. This is particularly true if the firm's systems reward business development as a criterion for promotion to partner or as a factor in compensation, for example.

Sally J. Schmidt is President of Schmidt Marketing, Inc. in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The company has consulted with more than 350 law firms on their marketing, client service and business development strategies. She can be reached at (651) 222-6102 or [sallyschmidt@schmidt-marketing.com](mailto:sallyschmidt@schmidt-marketing.com).

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